Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding in higher education – a special issue

Editorial

Knowledge is at the centre of students' engagement with higher education. So much so that it almost seems platitudinous to argue that it is the critical relationships that students develop with knowledge that makes a university degree a higher form of education. However, when policy makers discuss higher education and ways of defining the quality of an undergraduate degree, there is remarkably little discussion of knowledge (see Ashwin at el in press). Similarly there has been relatively little research into the ways in which particular forms of knowledge are positioned in higher education curricula and the ways in which students come to engage with these forms of knowledge. Research into students' experiences of studying in higher education have been dominated by studies that focus on teaching and learning, the majority of which tend to separate teaching from learning (see Ashwin 2009). This has meant that research has tended not to examine the relations between knowledge and curriculum in higher education. As Tight (2012, p.66) argues, in contrast to research into compulsory education, it is "uncommon to find higher education researchers (or practitioners) directly discussing the curriculum". Tight's (2012) categorisation of higher education research is revealing in this regard. His categories focus on student experience, teaching and learning, course design, and knowledge and research. The knowledge and research category contains no research examining issues relating to curriculum and even the research discussed within the course design category includes very little examination of curriculum instead focusing on the design of courses, learning and teaching methods, and writing and assessment.

Where curriculum is discussed, there is very little discussion of the *relations* between knowledge, curriculum, teaching and learning, assessment and the understandings that student develop through their engagement with higher education programmes. The design of this special issue is based on a particular view of curriculum which highlights these relations. In earlier work with Andrea Abbas and Monica McLean (Ashwin et al. 2012) and informed by Basil Bernstein's (2000) notion of the pedagogic device, we argued that the way in which knowledge is transformed as it moves from a research context, to higher education curricula, to the understandings that students' develop of this knowledge can be characterised in terms of knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum and knowledge-as-student-understanding. What Bernstein (2000) makes clear is that the transformation of knowledge as it moves from each of these contexts is not simply based on the logic of knowledge itself. Rather these transformations are the sites of struggle in which different voices seek to impose particular versions of legitimate knowledge, curriculum and student understanding.

The argument underpinning this special issue is that focusing on the relations between knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum and knowledge-as-student-understanding offers a powerful way of gaining a sense of the transformative power of higher education because it brings into focus the ways in which higher education transforms students'

understanding and identities. This involves developing a deeper sense of how students' engagement with knowledge and curriculum can transform their relations with themselves and the world.

This special issue offers a starting point for beginning to address the gap in research into knowledge and curriculum in higher education whilst also problematising the relations between knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum, and knowledge-as-student-understanding. There are two aspects of the way in which the Special Issues attempts to do this. The first is by including papers from a range of conceptual and methodological approaches in order to examine these relations. As I have argued previously (Ashwin 2009, 2012), different theoretical perspectives offer different ways of characterising the objects of research, which highlight some aspects of those objects and put others in the background. Within the Special Issue there are articles that take an Actor-Network Theory approach (Fenwick and Edwards) to understanding these relations, as well as approaches informed by the work of Basil Bernstein (Luckett and Hunma; Muller and Young) and Pierre Bourdieu (James). There are also articles which draw on an academic literacies approach (Paxton and Frith), adopt a threshold concepts lens (Land, Rattray and Vivian) and draw on phenomenography (Ashwin, Abbas and McLean and Trigwell and Prosser) in order to understand the relations between knowledge, curriculum and students experiences of higher education.

The second aspect is that the articles themselves focus on different elements of these relations. The relations between knowledge-as-research and knowledge-as-curriculum are examined in two articles. Fenwick and Edwards draw on Actor Network Theory in order to bring 'a network sensibility' to understanding knowledge. This approach highlights the fragility and contingency of concepts and examines the ways in networks of heterogenous elements are brought together in order to produce the body-like quality that established knowledge possesses. This approach highlights the ways in which the representation of knowledge is part of its enactment rather than separate from it and that rather than knowledge being *about* the real world it is *part* of the real world. This leads to an emphasis on intervening in the world rather than simply learning about it. In contrast, rather than seeking to understand the way in which the specialised voice of disciplinary knowledge is produced, Muller and Young's article examine conflicts over the ways in which disciplinary knowledge is positioned and transformed into curricula in universities. They examine current pressures that are challenging the legitimacy of disciplinary knowledge in universities and seeking to prioritise the development of skills. They argue that these pressures underestimate the importance of universities providing students access to specialised knowledge which can transform their understanding of the world and themselves.

Two articles in this special issue examine the relations between teaching and curriculum in higher education. Trigwell and Prosser's article takes a phenomenographic approach to understanding variation in the way that university teachers understand the notion of constructive alignment (the idea that curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment all need to be aligned so that they work together to help students to achieve the objectives of a course). Trigwell and Prosser show how different teachers can understand this notion in very different ways and discuss the impact that this can have on programmes that are

jointly taught by academics with qualitatively different understandings of constructive alignment. In contrast to the focus on individual university teachers in Trigwell and Prosser's article, James's article highlights the ways in which assessment practices are not simply based on the approach of individual university teachers but also reflect their position within multiple fields of practice such as their disciplines and their institutional location. This is based on a Learning Cultures perspective that is informed by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which highlights the ways in which assessment practices in higher education involve the interweaving of particular views of knowledge, learning, development that can be in conflict with each other.

Two articles in this special issue examine the relations between knowledge-as-curriculum and knowledge-as-student-understanding. Paxton and Frith draw on an academic literacies perspective in order to examine students' understandings of particular elements of their curriculum. Drawing on examples from a study of a foundation course in the natural sciences at the University of Cape Town, they show how students everyday understanding of words such as 'rate' and 'increase' can lead them to misuse these terms whilst writing scientific reports. Paxton and Frith argue that this highlights the importance of understanding the relations between the prior discourses that students draw on when entering higher education and the discourses, conventions and genres of the academic disciplines that they are studying. Luckett and Hunma's article further examines the challenges of curriculum design in foundation courses, in this case in relation to a course on the humanities and social sciences. Through examining curriculum documents from a Bernsteinian perspective, they argue that the students need to develop different kinds of 'gazes' and 'lenses' in order succeed in different subjects and that the key pedagogic challenge is how to give students access to understanding the gazes and lenses that are required for particular subjects.

The final two articles examine the relations between knowledge-as-research and knowledge-as-student-understanding. Land, Rattray and Vivian's article examines the liminal space in which students' sense of who they are and what they know is transformed as they engage with difficult knowledge. Working within threshold concepts approach, they draw on semiotic theory in order to open up the liminal space to deeper analysis and argue that this approach offers the possibility of affording a space for collective transactional curriculum enquiry involving subject experts, students and educational researchers. Ashwin, Abbas and McLean's article takes a phenomenographic approach to examine the ways in which students' understanding of sociological knowledge changes over the course of their undergraduate degrees. They argue that students' accounts of sociological knowledge shift from a very general account of the world to one structured by the curriculum to one that recognises the partiality of sociology in understanding the world. In doing so, they illustrate the shifting relations between the student, the world and the discipline of sociology and argue that they highlight the ways in which students' engagement with knowledge is at the centre of the transformational nature of higher education.

It is the key role of knowledge in the transformational nature of higher education that makes further study of the relations between knowledge-as-research, knowledge-as-curriculum and knowledge-as-student-understanding so important. The articles in this special issue illustrate the ways in which different conceptual and methodological

approaches offer different ways of understanding the dynamic relations between these elements. All of the articles emphasise the importance of knowledge in transforming our relations with the world and the ways in which knowledge is transformed as we engage with it. Further research is needed from a multiplicity of perspectives in order to deepen our understanding of the ways in which knowledge is transformed as it moves from knowledge-as-research to knowledge-as-curriculum to knowledge-as-student-understanding and the ways in which it transforms those who engage with it in these different forms. This is vital because it is the transformational relationships that academics and students develop with knowledge that defines the higher learning that is characteristic of a higher education.

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Order of the articles

Fenwick and Edwards
Muller and Young
Trigwell and Prosser
James
Paxton and Frith
Luckett and Hunma
Land, Rattray, and Vivian
Ashwin, Abbas and McLean